2008

Responding to Romanticism

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Research Honors
May 2008

Introduction

I have always been an avid reader; however, for most of my life, this has meant one of two things: I was an absorbed reader, or I was an analytical reader. My earliest engagement with texts was one of complete absorption and reverie—I sought refuge in the things I read, using them to lock out external concerns and temporarily silence my own thoughts, replacing them with the author's words. I associate such readings with the hours I spent as a child hanging upside down on the blue armchair in our living room, my legs thrown over its back and a book held above my face, the outside world reduced to the blank white ceiling framing the pages that otherwise filled my field of vision. I was utterly oblivious to everything else around me at such times, the flimsy paper leaves of the book forming an impenetrable barrier between my mind and anything outside the story, and I passively allowed myself to be swept up in the alternative world the author presented, my own identity temporarily absorbed into those of the characters. When I finally sat up again, the world would spin for several minutes before righting itself, as though I was waking up from a particularly vivid dream. It was this form of reading that initially made me love literature, and, while I have long since outgrown the ability to read in such a position, this type of engagement is one I have continued to find rewarding and meaningful throughout my life.

In the classroom, however, I soon learned a completely different method of reading that demanded an approach opposite to that which I had always practiced. Beginning in early high school, I was primarily taught to approach literature in an impersonal, clinical manner, as though any reactions or responses that did not stem from impartial analysis were inevitably misleading. At this point, I was encouraged to excise

every suggestion of subjective emotion from my written responses—one of the first things I remember learning in my composition lessons was to never use "I" in academic writing. However, despite my initial frustration with the limitations I felt this mode of response placed on me, I quickly began discovering the rewards such readings could offer. Rather than devouring books, most of which I then relegated to a back shelf in my room to yellow and gather dust, I learned to go over passages again and again, examining every element of the author's phrasing to glean new details and layers of meaning from the text with each reading. I began to understand that the language with which authors constructed their works was as significant as the content. In one of my most vivid high school memories, I recall sitting in English class on an early autumn day, listening to the discussion of our reading for that day—an essay by Richard Steele. I'd not had any strong reaction to the essay upon my first reading of it the night before, but in class, my teacher read a section of the essay aloud, drawing our attention to the way in which the rhythm of the prose, which had been irregular until this moment, changed with the phrase, "poises the heart, and makes it beat with due time" (Steele 127), a line which she claimed mimicked the steady sound of a heartbeat. I was stunned, but not by the content of the essay as a whole or the phrase itself. Rather, what struck me then and has caused the memory to stick with me ever since was the notion that authors crafted such details, enhancing the meaning of the words with their sound and rhythm. This kind of analysis, I realized, provided a completely different, and potentially richer, way of experiencing texts.

Largely as a result of this moment, I decided that I wanted to become a better reader: rather than merely passively experiencing the things I read, which had always

seemed sufficient to me in the past, I wanted instead to learn to understand them more deeply by honing my own abilities to perceive and uncover such details. Thus it was my analytical reading, rather than my earlier absorbed reading, that prompted me to choose to take the most challenging literature courses I could in high school and later select English as my focus in college. However, I continued to consider the two forms of reading I practiced largely antithetical to one another, and when it came time to write my formal responses for classes, I did my best to remain distant from the material I analyzed and to limit myself to purely cerebral interactions with the texts. I discarded all of my original impressions in favor of what I viewed as the intellectual, "correct" response, still distrustful of any insight that I felt stemmed from a personal emotional reaction, even when it dovetailed neatly with my critical insights, as I had come to associate such reactions with my earlier, and what I now considered more shallow, method of reading.

It was only when I began reading and analyzing at the university level the works of the British Romantics that I discovered the wealth of possibilities a combination of the two could offer. The way in which I was taught to approach the Romantics in the course that prompted this project played a significant role in this realization. For example, we read both creative and critical/theoretical works by the Romantic writers. Thus, it became very clear that many of the authors associated with Romanticism were not only poets, but literary critics as well, and that, for the Romantics, these two roles did not necessarily exist independently of one another. Of course, the interplay between the creative and the critical is not unique to Romanticism. In many of the periods and literary movements before and after the Romantic, authors have engaged with the works of previous writers in their own creations (much of Shakespeare's artistry, for instance, is largely

acknowledged to lie in how he modifies, combines, and renders earlier narratives, while later writers like Carole Maso, an author who influenced the structure of one of my own essays, have used elements drawn from a multitude of literary sources as key building blocks in their own works, reassembling and reinterpreting those elements by placing them in new contexts or arrangements), and any of these writers could have provided the insights I explore in this project. However, I most clearly saw the interplay between the creative and the critical in my course on the British Romantics.

My vision was aided by the fact that this course on the Romantics encouraged me to engage with the material in ways that were both critical and creative. In addition to critical essays and papers, one assignment required that students keep a notebook of personal responses to course readings. The seeds for the essays in this project were planted and germinated in that assignment. Thus, it was my creative and critical reactions to the work of the Romantics, combined with the creative and critical works of the Romantics themselves, which provided me with examples of a different kind of engagement with texts, illustrating the possibility of a response that was both visceral and reflective, emotional and intellectual, imaginative and theoretical.

The writings of the Romantics provide models of a range of possible responses to literary works, and I drew on these models in formulating my approaches to the texts I engage with in my essays. The theoretical and critical writings of authors like Thomas De Quincey often incorporate creative and personal elements, and poets like William Blake respond to literary works and formulate their own theories in a creative format. In some cases, Romantic authors use other texts primarily as inspiration for creative work,

responding to them on an associative, imaginative level rather than a logical or critical one, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge did in the creation of his poem "Kubla Khan."

De Quincey illustrates how personal, subjective responses can lead to insights that are meaningful to both the author of the response and other readers in his essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*" by using his emotional reaction to a moment in Shakespeare's play as a route to intellectual insights. De Quincey writes that the simple and seemingly insignificant action of a knock at the gate after the murder of Duncan in *Macbeth* has, since his boyhood, "reflected back upon the murder a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity" (389) for him, but that while he has "endeavored with [his] understanding to comprehend this [effect]" (389), he can never satisfactorily account for the degree to which he is moved by the moment. However, despite the fact that he can find no rational explanation for his reaction, he refuses to dismiss his feelings, instead trusting that they are significant and will ultimately lead him to a greater comprehension of *Macbeth* as a whole.

De Quincey uses this personal response to guide his explorations of the incident, asking his readers to draw parallels between this moment in the play and other incidents they may have witnessed, such as the first stirrings that indicate the return of consciousness to the victim of a fainting fit and the moment in which daily activities resume after the passage of a funeral parade through the streets of a city (392). De Quincey calls such moments when "the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them" (393), the most affecting moments of such events, using this as evidence to support his explanation for the power the similar moment in *Macbeth* has for

him. Ultimately, he presents the power of this simple stage direction not as an accident or something to which he alone is susceptible, but as evidence of Shakespeare's genius and craft. He encourages his readers to appreciate this genius in the conclusion of his essay, in which he praises Shakespeare's work as being "like the phenomena of nature" (393) in which "there can be no too much or too little, nothing useless or inert" (394).

In order to support his claim and increase his readers' sensitivity to Shakespeare's art, De Quincey appeals not only to his readers' intellects, but to their emotions as well, and the reading that emerges, while personal, is also valid and illuminating. He "exhort[s] the reader never to pay any attention to his understanding when it stands in opposition to any other faculty of the mind" (389), and, while he concedes that such intellectual understanding is "useful and indispensable," he also describes it as "the meanest faculty in the human mind and the most to be distrusted" (389). De Quincey's preference for the imaginative or emotional over the rational is characteristic of the Romantics, and his essay demonstrates the potential fruitfulness of such a response.

Although De Quincey's essay is certainly a work of literary criticism, it does not take a purely intellectual approach to the play it analyzes, instead allowing its argument to be guided by emotion and personal experiences completely outside the realm of literature. This approach not only leads De Quincey himself to a deeper comprehension of his own reactions, but also allows his readers to participate in his discoveries by taking them through each step in his thought process and his analysis of those thoughts, thereby letting his readers share in his experience and instilling the moment with meaning for them as well. By trusting that his subjective reaction to the knocking at the gate is

significant, De Quincey arrives at a critical insight that simple reasoning might not have revealed and enriches *Macbeth* for both himself and his readers.

While De Quincey incorporates subjective and creative elements into his analysis, other Romantics interweave the creative and the critical to an even greater degree, responding to texts with creative works of their own that do not only comment on the material they read, but also put forth the author's own responsive vision. A prime example of this is William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.*

Blake's book is a complex work that crosses genres and forms, but he ultimately uses it as a means by which to present his philosophical system, employing numerous strategies, including, but not limited to, literary criticism, to convey his ideas. At the core of Blake's philosophy is the conflict and interaction between such modes of being or attitudes to the world as "Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate" (Blake 144), which he terms "contraries" and deems necessary for "Human existence" (144) and "progression" (144) within that existence. Since he considers tensions between such opposing viewpoints essential, Blake is particularly interested in exploring the possibilities of multiple, contrasting perspectives, and he demonstrates this interest throughout *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, emphasizing the role the perspective or mindset of the observer plays in the interpretation of reality. He writes at one point that, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: infinite" (166), and he devotes much of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to giving voice to perspectives that are contrary to prevalent opinions, such as when he presents the reader with the "Proverbs of Hell" (152), which include statements like, "A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees" (152).

In the process of conveying his philosophy, Blake's book engages with numerous other literary works, including the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the Bible, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Blake often performs unusual or revisionary readings of these authors, illustrating his philosophy through acts of literary criticism. Of these works, Blake's approach to Milton's epic serves as a particularly effective illustration of the types of responses that comprise *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Blake's engagement with Milton's text is active and personal, and his response to it is a synthesis of the creative and the critical that goes beyond literary criticism to become art.

At the heart of Blake's reading of Milton is the fact that he finds Milton most engaging and interesting when Milton writes of Hell, as Blake indicates when he asserts that "Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell" (150). This idiosyncratic observation, along with the attendant claim that "[Milton] was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (150), provides the impetus for a brief but drastic rereading of Milton's epic. Enacting his theory of contraries, Blake turns the Christian system *Paradise Lost* ostensibly supports on its head so that, in his assessment of the conflict the work presents, "[i]t indeed appeared to Reason as if Desire was cast out, but the Devil's account is that the Messiah fell, and formed a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss" (148-150). In this reading, it is not the authoritative God that is celebrated by Milton's work, but rather God's contrary, the rebellious and energetic Lucifer.

However, Blake does not confine himself to such direct statements in presenting his own system and worldview; he also enacts these ideas by adopting the voices and

perspectives of the hosts of Heaven and the denizens of Hell in order to further explore his critical claims and his theories of contraries. The perspective Blake employs throughout *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* resembles that of Milton's Satan when he asserts that, "[t]he mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (1.254-255), and Blake uses this perspective to illustrate the possibilities offered by his philosophical system. In several sections titled "A Memorable Fancy," Blake invents dialogues between angels and devils, with Blake placing himself in the position of the latter and presenting viewpoints that are contrary to those embraced by the angels, resulting in a perception of reality that is entirely different from reality as the angels perceive it. Blake writes, for instance, that he "was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius (which to Angels look like torment and insanity)" (150), and at another point, he finds a vision of Hell an angel shows him completely transformed when the angel leaves, the "black tempest" (174) becoming "a pleasant bank beside a river" (176). In instances such as these, Blake inserts himself into the worlds presented by the authors he addresses and speaks from new, infernal perspectives in order to make room for his own alternative visions. For writers like Blake, full engagement with a text requires that readers not merely respond to the material while remaining essentially separate from and outside of it, but rather that they internalize the text, filter its content through their own minds, and fashion something new from its ideas and components, answering the vision of the source text by presenting visions of their own.

Another Romantic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, would, like Blake, use a text as a starting point for his creative work, but in this case the text merely suggested a few

images that Coleridge's mind then expanded and embellished. According to his account of the creation of "Kubla Khan," Coleridge was reading the collection of histories and travel narratives *Purchas his Pilgrimage* when he fell asleep, and the lines from this work, "'In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall'" (qtd. in Heath 474) then prompted all that followed. Coleridge's final poem has only a tenuous connection to the text that prompted it; the first few lines of "Kubla Khan" directly reflect the language and images of the sentence from Coleridge's book, but these merely serve as a gateway to the rest of the poem, which, while possibly drawing in less direct ways on different parts of *Purchas his Pilgrimage* or other sources, is entirely a creation of the author's mind. His writing reflects not an analytical, intellectual response to the content of the passage, but rather a purely imaginative, associative response to its images and the music of the words themselves. In this instance, Coleridge demonstrates one extreme of the range of responses such a personal engagement with a text can encompass, in which the text read by the author serves as a catalyst for the final work by inspiring the author's own imagination, but is not necessarily the work's focus.

In keeping with their tendency to become personally engaged with texts, the Romantics often do not confine the insights they derive from their reading and written responses to the realm of literature, instead using their perspective as readers and authors as a lens through which to view and interpret the world. They allow literature and their readings of it to infuse and enrich other aspects of their lives. Coleridge, for instance, argues in one of his letters for the necessity of allowing children to read "romances, and relations of giants and magicians and genii" (16) based on his belief that such reading is

the only "way of giving the mind a love of the Great and the Whole" (16). Children who learn about the universe only through rational education, Coleridge claims, "contemplate nothing but *parts*, and all *parts* are necessarily little. And the universe to them is but a mass of *little things*" ("Letter" 16). Like many of the other Romantics, he emphasizes the significance of "imagination" over "judgement" and "rapture" over "philosophy" ("Letter" 619), and he believes that these qualities can be nurtured through engagement with certain kinds of texts and stories which provide a framework for interpreting the world. This Romantic tendency to view reading and writing as a primary means of reflecting on and developing a way of interpreting the world is also exemplified by Shelley's assertion that "[p]oets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (989). For Romantics like Coleridge and Shelley, the ways of seeing one learns from reading and engaging with texts can be applied to more than just literature, providing a way of interpreting, and even experiencing, the world.

My project is an effort to respond to some of the works of the Romantics in these typically Romantic ways, and, through my own writing, to explore the possibilities such a holistic response offers for a more personally meaningful engagement with texts than other forms of reading and analysis might. I have attempted to present a range of the many possible responses such an approach offers within my collection. Like De Quincey, I proceed from a subjective, idiosyncratic response to the texts I focus on, drawing on my own experiences and reactions in order to shed light on the material I read. In doing this, my goal is to not only enhance my intellectual comprehension of the Romantic works I examine, but also to participate with these texts by relating them to my own experiences

or ideas and exploring the interaction between the two in my written responses. By participating with the texts in this way, I do not simply analyze them, but rather, in a form of engagement similar to Blake's, allow the texts and my own ideas or assumptions to interact and modify one another. As a result, my responses are sometimes a synthesis of the ideas of the texts and my own, while at other times they illustrate the uneasy interaction between the two, exploring the tension, or even contradictions, between them. In some cases, this kind of engagement also allows me, like Coleridge, to produce written responses that are not only critical reactions to other works, but also creative works in and of themselves that, while deeply intertwined with the material that inspires them, also stand on their own as independent works of art. To this end, my written responses are a fusion of the creative and the critical, each piece employing the two modes to different degrees.

My written responses serve not only as a record of my grapplings with the texts with which I work, but also are themselves an integral part of my readings—they are the medium in which I integrate the texts, my experience of those texts, and, in most cases, outside experiences or readings into a single, unified reaction, the writing experience itself making meaning out of the works and my responses to them. I have chosen to use the personal essay as the format for my responses, since, as a form which is often employed for both creative writing and literary criticism, the essay is particularly suited to the integration of the two. While these responses are personal, they are also intended to provide insights into the works I address by presenting my own, sometimes unusual, perspectives on them and to examine the ways in which we find meaning in literary

works by relating the material we read to our own individual experiences and other texts we have read in unique, and often unexpected, ways.

The collection as a whole illustrates my own personal development in my engagement with these texts, moving from more traditional, critical responses to responses that are largely creative and draw on the theories and works of the Romantics primarily for inspiration. This is not to suggest that the later pieces are necessarily more sophisticated than the earlier ones, but that my project is intended to present a spectrum of possible responses that a Romantic reading allows for by either enhancing or downplaying the creative or critical element in the individual pieces. I also present a range of responses in that my earlier work illustrates Romantic theories through my own experiences or invented scenarios while the later material encounters the limits of such attempts to model these theories and instead uses them as inspiration for my own largely creative experiments. Rather than simply applying Romantic theories to my life and writing, I attempt to enact them in my final essay.

These calculated intentions behind each piece and the overall organization of my essays might seem antithetical to a Romantic approach, particularly as Keats criticizes writing that has a "palpable design" (108) upon the reader, but my intention in assembling this collection is to demonstrate the possibility of multiple designs. The Romantics each formulated and advocated their own, sometimes conflicting, theories of writing and visions of the world through their work, and I attempt to do the same, but in my case the overarching vision presented is one that acknowledges different methods and levels of engagement with texts that can all be equally valid in order to illustrate the rich

variety of productive, rewarding forms of reading and responding an approach that is both creative and critical can allow.

"Rills: A Map of a Misreading" served as my own gateway to the project in the sense that it was my first exploration of the form of reading I engage with in this and my other pieces, and, through its placement at the beginning of the collection, it also serves as the gateway to the project for my readers by presenting this initial reading which unintentionally merges a personal and critical approach and my subsequent realization of the rewards such a reading can offer. Like De Quincey in his essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*," I use a personal reaction to a small detail, in my case a single word that I discovered I had misread in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the poem. When my misreading is corrected and the image that had been the basis of my love of the poem changed, I am able, with the aid of the theories of Coleridge, Shelley, and Wordsworth regarding the imagination, to perceive the full extent of my imagination's workings and come to appreciate them more fully, as the Romantics did. This experience mirrors the very act of imaginative creation that the poem portrays, and it allows me to engage with the poem on a new level. I read and understand the poem by actively participating in the realization it illustrates. The fact that my misreading actually enhances my experience of the poem also convinces me of the validity of such a personal, idiosyncratic reading, a concept which is the basis of the rest of my essays in the project.

"At Midnight: A Meditation" is the beginning of my experiments in applying Romantic forms and theories to my own writing and experiences outside of literature. Although the scene itself is mostly fictionalized, I draw on my reactions to and

knowledge of the stars to create an essay modeled in part on the descriptive-meditative poetic form practiced by Coleridge in poems like "Frost at Midnight" and "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison." However, in this essay, I begin exploring the limits of such modeling, initially finding that I cannot completely enter into a Romantic vision of the unity of life (as Coleridge does when he comes to the realization that "No sound is dissonant which tells of Life" (76) and blesses the creaking rook that flies overhead in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison") through my own contemplation, since my knowledge of the scientific workings of the universe continually intrudes. However, in this case, I am ultimately able to achieve a sense of unity and peace through accepting that knowledge and, rather than working against it by attempting to silence it in favor of a mystical or superstitious vision of the stars, working through these scientific facts to reach a similar state and perspective by a very different route. While the vision I achieve at the end dispels some of the feelings of isolation and insignificance I feel at the opening of the essay, it is still rooted in the scientific facts that bring on the meditation in the first place. Although I can achieve a new vision of the sky, it is not exactly the one that I intended to reach, and it is ultimately more of a truce between the state of mind I seek and the facts I can't escape than a victory of the former over the latter. The transformation that the redescription portion of the essay presents is intentionally incomplete and imperfect, reflecting my conclusion that, while Romantic theories are valuable and can provide meaningful insights, they are also limited and may not always perfectly fit my actual experience.

I continue this exploration of the possibilities and limits of Romantic theories more fully in my essay "Reunion," in which I seek to model a Romantic experience not

just in a fictionalized scene, but in my own life. Unlike in "At Midnight: A Meditation," I do not set out attempting to perfectly enact a Romantic theory, which I have concluded will inevitably fail, but rather begin by questioning William Wordsworth's belief that the sensations of childhood cannot be fully recaptured in maturity. I instead propose my own counter-theory that my increased understanding and intervening experiences might actually enhance those reactions and allow me to experience more fully the sense of the sublime the Romantics prized, a theory which I attempt to fulfill in my life by applying it to the return of the periodical cicadas, an event that I had vivid childhood memories of and which was repeated for the first time seventeen years after my initial experience. I ultimately find, however, that even after adjusting and personalizing the theory, trying to model it in my life and writing by once again striving for a particular kind of vision undermines my goal. By trying to make my experience conform to specific expectations, I limit that experience, and I find it impossible to will certain reactions or emotions. Instead, I discover that it takes the intervention of the unexpected to approximate the experience I seek, paradoxically bringing me closest to enacting the theory I set out to illustrate when I stop attempting to make the cicadas' return fit a predetermined mold.

In this essay, I also begin exploring texts other than traditional Romantic ones, supplementing the writings of Wordsworth and eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke with those of Aldous Huxley. This allows me to draw on multiple works and sometimes conflicting theories in order to formulate my own vision, a vision that I ultimately fashion into an essay independent of the works from which it grows. In addition to carefully selecting works to bring into conversation with one another for calculated critical ends, I also include in my essay material I encounter by fortuitous

accident which provides me with unexpected insights, again illustrating the productive potential of the integration of critical analysis and more subjective associations or responses. "Reunion" represents my closest, most thorough examination of the possibilities and limits of such readings, as I employ several approaches to my texts and experiences that I then develop, transform, and sometimes discard over the course of the essay. In this piece, I seek to combine rigorous analysis with descriptive writing, calculation with insight, and poetry with philosophical systems in order to arrive at the fullest and most meaningful response possible to the texts I draw on by filtering the ideas I examine through as many different methods of engagement as possible.

"!" is the most creative of my pieces, drawing not only on poetry by both the Romantics and authors of other eras, but even on painting, the natural world, and an article from a journal of psychology, among other things, weaving all these elements into my experiences to create a final work that incorporates all these threads in order to express a personal realization of my own. I use Carole Maso's *AVA* as inspiration for the structure of this essay, utilizing a form that allows me to break down the works I quote, as well as my own memories and thoughts, into individual phrases and scenes that I then combine into a written web or mosaic that reflects the route my own contemplation takes. One line or idea suggests another, and certain themes are continually returned to and reworked as my understanding of my own mind increases and my ideas are clarified. Rather than analyzing a reading, this essay is an enactment of an associative engagement that melds texts, life, and reverie, bringing concepts and phrases from multiple sources together as the active mind of a Romantic reader does and putting them into conversation with one another. This collection of elements from my own life and other sources brings

me to the deeper understanding of my own mind that I describe at the end of the essay, and the essay as a whole is a reflection of my own striving towards this understanding. The essay is an effort to make sense of the seemingly chaotic series of ideas that occur to my mind in conjunction with one another, and it is by trusting that there is a connection among all these elements and following them through to their conclusion that the essay itself forms, reflecting the way in which, in a response that allows for multiple modes of engagement, all these texts and the thoughts they inspire coalesce.

The responses of my project suggest that full engagement with a text blurs the boundaries between reading, writing, and living. A reading based on the approaches and concepts of the Romantics does not entail merely dissecting a text or passively absorbing it, but rather requires filtering it through multiple faculties and lenses—the critical, the creative, and the personal. Such a reading not only demands an active and creative reader, it also allows the material itself to become richer and more alive in the mind of its reader. Threads from one or more texts are drawn out and woven through the reader's own ideas and creations, potentially resulting in ever more complex, interdependent patterns. In this approach, written material does not have to exist statically on the printed page, but instead can go through continual revisions though the application of fresh, individual, and often idiosyncratic perspectives or experiences, creating new variations on the themes of the text. While this project feels to me a vital exploration of my personal readings of Romantic works, along with my own experiences and ideas that those readings connect to or shape, it fortunately presents only a few of the rich variety of possibilities this form of engagement can offer. The material in this project is the beginning of what will be an

ongoing process for me as I continue to read, write, and live, each new experience reshaping and enriching those that came before, and all of those that will follow.

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Rills: A Map of a Misreading

For many of the Romantics, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Percy Shelley, the examination of the power of the human imagination is a central aspect of their poetic and critical works, and they often subordinate reality and reason to the imagination. Shelley, for instance, writes in his *Defence of Poetry* that "[r]eason is to imagination as the instrument is to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance" and Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* that the primary imagination is "the living power and prime agent of all human perception." Freely formed, fresh associations between objects and ideas are vital to their poetic works, and the poets not only accept, but even celebrate the unique associations created by the individual imagination as an antidote to the mechanical reproduction of past language. Wordsworth praises such associations when he writes in *The Two-Part Prelude* that the scenes of nature he viewed as a child ultimately became meaningful to him not only for their inherent beauty, but also as a result of his emotional associations with these objects, so that they became "habitually dear, and all / Their hues and forms were by invisible links / Allied to the affections." For each of these poets, the inventions and perceptions of the mind are of greater significance than any aspect of the external world. Since the role of the imagination is so central in the Romantics' world view, their works are, of course, greatly enriched by an imaginative reading in which the reader's own mind becomes an active participant in the work, performing the powers of imagination that the poetry describes. In my own experience, it was an unusual interpretation of a single word in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" that illustrated this power the Romantics praised.

When I first read "Kubla Khan" in junior high, I was immediately captivated by its vivid images and found myself repeatedly drawn back to its lines in a way I had never been to any other work. It was subtitled "a vision in a dream," and I took it at its word—only much later would I begin to understand its significance as a portrayal of the Romantic poet as an outsider, creating sublime, airy visions—making no attempt to draw meaning from the poem. When I first read it, I merely allowed myself to be carried through its fantasy landscape as though by my own sleeping mind, filling out each phrase with an abundance of details only loosely suggested by the words. I could almost smell the heavy fragrance—reminiscent of my grandmother's spice cabinet—that wafted from the exotic blossoms of the "incense-bearing tree[s]." The cool, damp darkness of the "caverns measureless to man" and the colder spray of the river as it rolled towards that "lifeless ocean" were nearly tangible on my skin. I lingered within that impossible "dome in air"—sunny even as it cast its shadow on a "sunless sea", filled with glinting, glassy "caves of ice" that never melted, no matter how the sun shone. In particular, however, I was entranced by the line, "And here were gardens bright with sinuous rills." I had recently read a series of science fiction novels, *The Alien Chronicles* by Deborah Chester, that used the word "rill" to describe a decorative frill or fan of skin around the necks of an alien reptilian race, and since I equated these with similar skin formations on frilled lizards, bearded dragons, and certain kinds of dinosaurs, I simply assumed that "rill" was a word used to describe those features.

At the time I was so certain I knew the meaning of the word that it didn't even occur to me to look it up in a dictionary when I encountered it in the seemingly unusual context in which Coleridge used it in his poem. I tried to imagine what he might be

intending to convey with this image, finally deciding that he was using the word rill to describe fern-like plants, which was the closest thing I could imagine to a lizard's neck frill that might be found in a garden. However, I did first consider the possibility that the gardens might be filled with exotic, "rilled" lizards, an image that was never entirely erased from my mind, and so with the reptilian connotations I had given the word "rill," I always imagined glittering, scaled things creeping through the undergrowth of the garden when I read the line. They were only visible in flashes, an echo of my original definition of the word that was half-lost under the lush vegetation the perceived metaphor had seeded in my mind. Since these rills were "sinuous," I saw a variety of ferns and fan-like leaves that grew in a wild, twisting tangle, curving over one another and wrapping around the "incense bearing trees." Add "bright," and this garden was an intricate mesh of emerald so brilliant as to be almost luminous when glimpsed among the blossoming trees—surprising explosions of fronds akin to the "sunny spots of greenery" enfolded by the dim surrounding forests. Once this exotic garden had solidified in my mind, the description of it became my favorite line in the poem, the one that always ran through my head when "Kubla Khan" was mentioned.

I don't remember what context I first ran across the word "rill" in that made me question my own definition of it and prompted me to look it up for the first time, but I do remember my confusion when I pulled the little paperback dictionary down off my bookcase and read that a rill was simply "a small brook." Although the first doubts had been planted, I was not ready to concede the definition that was so essential to my understanding of "Kubla Khan." Instead, I decided that apparently "rill" could mean both the fringe of skin on a lizard's neck and a small brook. I'd encountered stranger things in

language before, and I wasn't using a particularly large dictionary. I reasoned that there simply hadn't been room to include the obviously obscure definition I was using, so the next time I went to the public library, I looked the word up in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I scoured every line of the definition, but there was not one mention of lizards. I still was not quite willing to admit defeat, so I searched online for any use of the word in the way I was defining it that would justify my reading of "Kubla Khan." I found nothing. It was only when I finally accepted that my definition of "rill" was completely erroneous that I focused on figuring out where I had come up with it in the first place, eventually tracing it back to its source in that old series of science fiction novels.

I felt betrayed, but more by "Kubla Khan" than Chester's novels or my own flawed vocabulary. For several years I had been telling anyone that asked that "Kubla Khan" was my favorite poem, mostly based on a line that I had completely misinterpreted. I read the poem again, forcing myself to envision sparkling brooks curling among the "incense-bearing trees" rather than verdant ferns concealing darting reptiles. The poem wasn't the same. The gardens were bare, little more than an empty framework for everything my imagination had once created within them. The image evoked in that line seemed dimmer and more pedestrian than the surreal fantasy garden that I had once found so breathtaking, and the loss colored the rest of the poem. Previously, the brilliant garden from the opening lines had hovered like an afterimage over every succeeding landscape, twining among the roots of the ancient forests, glowing in the sunlight, and reflecting in the caves of ice. Now when I read the poem, forcibly suppressing everything that had sprung from the "sinuous rills," the absence of what I had once seen overshadowed what was there. I still enjoyed "Kubla Khan," but the new meaning of that

one word had completely changed my response to it. The images were still beautiful and striking, but they no longer seemed to be the ones I had thought so unique and vivid when I first encountered them. Even when I tried to recall them, my original images became harder to conjure up as the new ones forcibly intruded, becoming more solid and fixed with every reading. With nothing to support them, the ferns in the garden shriveled, the colors faded, and the lizards vanished into the leaves without reappearing.

I didn't give much thought to "Kubla Khan" or rills again until I began learning about the Romantics' views on the imagination and reading other Romantic works. In particular, it was William Wordsworth's "Crossing the Alps" episode from Book VI of the *Thirteen Book Prelude* which prompted me to reexamine my own experience with a Romantic poem. Mountain peaks are a traditional location for theophanies, such as in the biblical episode of Moses and the burning bush, and so Wordsworth anticipates his crossing of the Alps, expecting to find the experience moving and satisfying to the inner "under-thirst" that drives him. However, Wordsworth and his companion cross the Alps without realizing they have done so, prompting first disbelief and then "deep and genuine sadness" and "dejection" in the poet when they are informed by a local peasant that they have already passed over the mountains and that the rest of their course is downwards. After this "usurpation" of his imagined experience by the more mundane reality, it initially seems to Wordsworth that he has passed over the mountains without any divine encounter or epiphany, the "awful promise" his mind had created around the idea of the experience unfulfilled. His experience, like my gardens of "Kubla Khan," was left an empty framework for a vision that was no longer supported by reality.

For Wordsworth, however, this dejection is passing and ultimately leads to a more powerful internal realization in place of an external experience. He does not simply allow the imagined vision to pass away or dismiss it as misleading, but instead praises the creative power of his own mind, ecstatically exclaiming, "Imagination! lifting up itself / Before the eye and progress of my song / Like an unfathered vapour." Wordsworth realizes that it was not the physical crossing of the Alps that was significant but what the idea of doing so meant to him, and ultimately he achieves a kind of theophany, although not in the way he had intended or expected. He does not encounter a divine force in the Alps, but rather his own imagination, and it is in his own mind and its perceptions of the landscape that he glimpses eternity—it is in this "invisible world" that "greatness make[s] abode" and he is "blessed in thoughts / That are their own perfection and reward." This insight prompts him to say to his soul, "'I recognize thy glory.'"

Wordsworth's experience and his subsequent tribute to the power of his imagination made me realize that my original reading of "Kubla Khan," incorrect word and all, was still a valuable reading. Like Wordsworth's crossing of the Alps, the power of "Kubla Khan" came not from the reading experience itself, but from what my mind made out of that experience. My misreading—both the delight it produced and the devastation I experienced when it was corrected—highlighted for me the power of my own imagination. It was not someone else's words that had moved me so deeply, but the workings of my own mind. The gardens of "Kubla Khan" were sublime because my imagination was sublime—it was not an instrument conjuring up images and ideas on another's command, but rather was itself creating them, and those creations were "their

own perfection and reward," independent enough of the poem that had inspired them to sustain themselves in my memory once the support of the words had been removed.

This revelation gave me a new perspective from which to view my misreading: it was a gift, not merely an error. Coleridge's poem was like a blueprint or a map: he had laid out the patterns, but ultimately it was my own mind that had to "build that dome in air." It is a testament to the Romantics' view of the imagination that my mind was able to take Coleridge's brief lines and construct out of them a vast landscape, from imposing, forest-covered hills to tufts of curling ferns. And not only was I able to wander through that imagined landscape, I was capable of straying from the established views to explore the spaces in between the "incense-bearing tree[s]" and the "sunny spots of greenery," filling in scenes of my own that meshed seamlessly with what was actually there. In his *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley writes that "[a]ll high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially." In a literal sense, Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and its gardens embody this for me. One word, perhaps especially a misunderstood one, can be the seed of an infinite variety of images, each one different depending on the mind it is planted in.

It is particularly appropriate that, of all the Romantic poems, it should be "Kubla Khan" that my mind embellished, given its origin in the unconscious. The entire episode purports to be a dream, and within that dream, Kubla constructs another vision, the "pleasure-dome" that in the end is only a "dome in air," vanishing at the close of the poem. The whole work highlights its own ephemeral, phantasmagorical nature while also illustrating its own power, and the images my mind created were as real and vivid as those the poet intended, even though the combination of words that initiated them never

existed. Rather than taking away from the images and ideas Coleridge sought to evoke in the reader's mind, my mind's own workings, revealed by the mundane reality of a misinterpreted word, actually highlighted the very power of imagination that Coleridge illustrates in "Kubla Khan."

At Midnight: A Meditation

It is silent and chill. Cabins and a few fires edge the far side of the pond, forming a golden half-moon of light. Tiny figures move in silhouette, and occasionally the whisper of laughter floats across the water, measuring out the distance between me and the other shore. These soft sounds leave me more isolated than the silence does, and the ground under my feet and the surrounding forest are erased by the night, leaving me gazing back at a remote island of illumination as I hover in a black void.

The water reflects the lights in shards, forming a broken path between me and the opposite bank and mimicking the stars above, which shine far more boldly and numerously than they do at my home in the city. It is as though a film has been wiped away and for the first time I stare up through a clear dome that does nothing to disguise the vastness beyond. There is no moon to distract my sight, and the light from the banks is too faint to detract from those countless glittering eyes that fix me in place with their unblinking gaze. I crane my neck back so that they fill my vision, and let that sight quiet all my murmuring, obstructive thoughts, allowing me to see the stars as they appear without any of my knowledge about them interfering. They draw me upwards, the world dropping away as they seem to encircle me with their steady, benevolent regard. For an instant everything takes on an elegant simplicity: there is only the brightness and the dark, and these perfect beads of light, shining like dew on the black weave of the sky that hangs over me, are the only things that exist. Even as I float freely among all these droplets of light, the night sky enfolds me as protectively as the blankets I burrowed under as a child to keep the monsters at bay. The darkness beneath is welcoming and inviting, a darkness completely different from the one that must lurk outside. But as I

think this, the spaces between the stars abruptly gape, the enclosing fabric I'd only imagined fraying and fragmenting to reveal the blacker void beyond and scattering the stars into distances far beyond my grasp as my flying turns to falling, the control of a moment before vanished.

I can only glimpse what observers thousands of years ago must have seen when they turned their faces up to this same sight—the living, sentient stars they sent their prayers to have become an outgrown fairytale. I can comprehend but not feel for more than a fleeting moment the sense of the divine others would later gain from following the ordered motions of precisely charted heavens—a vision that could only be real before men with telescopes and reams of number-covered parchment sent the stars tumbling away, when all those lights still circled us, safely embedded in crystalline spheres that protected the universe like a glass case around a rare and precious specimen. These cosmologies are no more real to me than a few dry diagrams tucked away in dusty books. Instead, I imagine I feel myself tumbling wildly, the motion of planet, solar system, and galaxy sending me through ever more complex spirals, my path tracing out patterns that do not conform to neat rules of geometry but are instead organic and messy. These interdependent, ever-multiplying arcs are not without beauty or logic, but it is the alien order I see in swarms of insects—the patterns are too complicated, too intricate for me to fully grasp the rules that govern them, and the movements of each individual are ultimately senseless, determined by abstract laws that have no awareness of the things they manipulate and, with no plan to guide the whole, produce only chaos. My own careening journey through empty space is equally unguided, the motions random and without music. They can be measured and plotted, but there is no overarching vision

guiding it all, and this knowledge leaves me helpless, my understanding useless in the face of a system that serves no purpose beyond its own existence.

I cannot erase the knowledge drummed into me by years of science classes, however much I might wish to at this moment. The stars cannot be gods, or souls, or even fixed, unchanging signposts for me. The intricate dance that has guided sailors and travelers of the past and was once the basis for religions and mythologies has lost its status as a divine artwork and been revealed as an illusion, a product of our own endless, dizzying pirouettes, and its mysteries mapped out. Like a magic trick revealed, its clockwork has lost the power to delight. Those perfect pinpricks of light have become ugly behemoths of red, white, and gold, trembling and spewing clouds of gas into space as they are reduced to massive, mechanical engines. And yet for all their undeniable materiality, their very existence is now in doubt: I know that many of the stars I see burned away to dim cinders thousands of years ago, the light that still races across distances that can only be expressed in rows on rows of zeros a mere echo, a ghost. And I cannot know which of those lights I look at now are there and which only mask the emptiness behind them.

Dizzy, I long to call out to the stars I know to be the stars of the past: "Return to what you were, stay this endless motion and erase all these uncertainties!" but the words are never even born in my throat. I cannot send prayers up to insensible masses of gas and dust that, despite what my senses tell me, may not even be there. They are devoid of meaning or purpose, completely remote from me, a miniscule and equally meaningless collection of particles clinging to an insignificant bit of rock, and could only answer my mind's workings with silent indifference.

And yet as I grasp all this with a despair that borders on awe, I must admit that there is a certain sublimity to the reality as the sky breaks all the bounds of geometric order and symmetry that observers have tried to place on it and follows its own complex, tangled rules with a mindless determination, its gears insensible to my floundering thoughts and heedless of what gets crushed in their motion. Even as the distances gape ever wider, the mechanics of it all have given gifts as well. If the stars take no interest in my welfare, neither are they malicious. There are no evil stars to be born under, only benign ones. Remote as the stars have become, I know that most of the elements in my body once burned in the heart of a long dead star, and may one day do so again. The basic process that creates everything I see and the light and body I see it with is not fission but fusion, unification, and the laws of this process tell me that it is the nature of the universe to continually forge the simple into the more complex, that each new generation of stars should be burdened with a greater percentage of weighty elements. At the most fundamental levels, I am bound to those distant lights at which I marvel. I latch onto this fact, which doesn't quite balance out everything else, but provides some comfort, nonetheless. It makes the vast spaces and times manageable and ties a universe that seemed ready to fly apart back together again.

I look away from the sky, dropping awkwardly back to Earth. I feel slightly unsteady, as though I have just stepped off a ship and don't yet expect solid ground beneath my feet. After such reeling thoughts, the bank and dark trees around me seem remarkably steady and firm, belying my anxieties of a moment before. The scent of damp soil and the drone of frogs are suddenly far more real than the whirl of planets and galaxies, and I am nestled deeply within these things, sheltered. Black silhouettes of

trees, just visible now to my night-adjusted vision against the sky, encircle me, and across the water the warm glow of windows and fires has grown dimmer over the past hour, but is still inviting, drawing me in towards the others and away from the retreating dark.

Reunion

May 17, 2007

The summer I was four years old the "seventeen year locusts," as we called them, emerged. They weren't locusts at all, but rather periodical cicadas, and after nearly two decades in the ground, brood XIII was emerging in the upper Midwest. Our neighborhood was an old one, its backyards thick with large trees and covered in soil that had lain undisturbed during the whole of their long larval phase, so they came out of the ground in the thousands. My memories of those weeks are the intensely sensory flashes of early childhood—cicadas coating the trees and making the bark look flaky and scaled with their wings, the abandoned nymph-exoskeletons clinging split and hollow on the screens, and of course the incessant, overwhelming droning that left my ears buzzing long after I'd gone indoors.

While the adults around me kept inside, stepping tentatively on sidewalks covered in a brown snow of discarded husks as they ducked between car and house, I was outside whenever I could be, blissfully unaware of what made everyone else shrink from the inch-and-a-half-long bugs. I willingly immersed myself in them, letting their prickly feet crawl over my hands and cling to my clothes when they landed on me in their reckless, bumbling flight. I even sought them out, collecting them in milk jugs and, when I was forbidden to bring them in the house, listening to their singing on the steps of the back porch. I was enthralled by that noise—and their faces. All the other insects I'd collected up until this point were small things with heads that were alien, anonymous lumps of mandibles and jointed feelers. The cicadas, on the other hand, had real faces that seemed aware and friendly. Their red eyes had what appeared to be little pupils that could meet

my own gaze, and their bulbous snouts were framed by dainty whiskers of antennae. Their bold colors and delicate, veined wings were beautiful to me.

The nymphs, however, I was afraid of. I would sometimes follow their tedious, treacherous course up the rough bark of the trees from a safe distance, disturbed by their hunched backs, vicious looking feet, and dull eyes. The adult cicadas rarely emerged from their shells in the day where I could see them, and so I was unable to connect the elegant, winged creatures I loved with these creeping things. Even worse were the empty, cracked husks that piled up around doorways or still inexplicably clung firmly to every surface, their claws gripping tenaciously below empty shells of eyes and split open backs. However many times it was explained to me that they were just skins, abandoned by insects that were entering a new phase of life, they still looked like little corpses to me.

The presence of the nymphs and shells was a small price to pay for the rest of that month, however. While seventeen years was a length of time beyond my ability to grasp as a four year old, I knew I was seeing something rare and, although I could not have clearly articulated it as such or fully grasped the concept at the time, sublime as I stood beneath trees quivering with insects, deafened by their chorus. Each individual cicada seemed an anomaly to me—I simply hadn't realized bugs nearly the size of the palm of my hand existed—and when I looked beyond my milk jug and the few individuals I had managed to capture, the whole swarm was overwhelming. The shrill singing was impossibly loud and seemed to come from everywhere, as though the air itself was vibrating. It was a noise that would have seemed more at home in the depths of a factory filled with screaming, grinding gears than in my backyard. Even as young as I was, the cicadas left me awed and silent before their numbers and the power of the emergence.

They carved their shapes and sound indelibly into my mind, the details, if growing more sporadic over the years, seeming to only become sharper and brighter as I grew older. With time, I remembered only drawn out, sunny afternoons as the images took on the bright hues and fluid edges of an impressionist painting in my memory.

The cicadas will reemerge in the early summer of this year. After seventeen years of only dormant memories, I'll be reliving the most vivid experience of my early childhood, the archetypal Romantic experience that Wordsworth describes in his poem "Tintern Abbey." The first time Wordsworth encountered the landscape around Tintern Abbey, the sights inspired "passion" and "a feeling and a love / That had no need of a remoter charm / By thought supplied, or any interest / Unborrowed from the eye." As was the case during my childhood encounter with the cicadas, his first visit to the banks of the Wye was an experience of pure feeling that came directly from the natural world with no need for mediating thought or analysis. There was no interpretation of this initial experience for Wordsworth, only full immersion in it as he nearly became a part of the landscape he viewed, "like a roe / …bound[ing] o'er the mountains."

When Wordsworth returns to the place he first visited five years before, however, he views the discrepancy between his remembered response and the reality he now experiences with "somewhat of a sad perplexity" and concludes that "[t]hat time is past, / And all its aching joys are now no more, / And all its dizzy raptures." For Wordsworth, these moments of thoughtless, intense sensation are a feature of youth left behind in maturity and replaced by a more contemplative, distant relation to the natural world. Pure feeling is displaced by "elevated thoughts" as the poet looks beyond the landscape itself to "something far more deeply interfused," "a motion and a spirit that … / … rolls

through all things." It is no longer the incidental, surface qualities of the scene that are of primary significance to him, but rather this universal, underlying spirit that he encounters in it. Although he describes his new feelings towards nature as a "far deeper zeal / Of holier love," he is no longer pulled into the landscape to the degree he was when he was younger, instead viewing it from a new distance and with a greater sense of control, the "wild ecstasies" of youth "matured / Into a sober pleasure." While his childhood perceptions are only accessible to him vicariously through the reactions of his younger sister, he calls the insights that come with age "[a]bundant recompense" for this change. For Wordsworth, the intense feelings at the moment of initial experience and a full appreciation and understanding of the significance of that experience cannot coexist. His new vision, however, is more meaningful to him than the original, and so he allows the old one to fade with little regret.

My reunion with the cicadas will not be the same as Wordsworth's return to the landscape above Tintern Abbey. I will not be surprised that my reaction to the cicadas has changed—I know I am no longer what I was when I first encountered them. In my case, however, the change is not the addition of a spiritual vision transcending the experience itself, but rather a new sense of fear and revulsion. In the past seventeen years I've grown increasingly distant from the shaded areas under the bushes I played in as a child and the muddy patches beneath the stones of our backyard into which I constantly burrowed my fingers, searching for anything small enough to capture and add to my collection in the rows of jars along the back of the porch. Initially, I was separated from these activities by force as I was told that I was too old to be spending my afternoons after school hunting for worms and chasing crickets, that I had to keep my nails clean and my hands washed

now, but later I fully abandoned them out of my own inclination as new interests captured my attention. I left the rocks and bushes of the backyard increasingly undisturbed, the spaces I'd hollowed out under the branches slowly filling in with new growth and the stones settling more deeply into the soil with each passing season. I learned to flinch back when I saw a spider on the wall, to be disgusted by a line of ants snaking across the kitchen floor, the initial fascination such things had held for me buried beneath new concerns about bugs getting into the food or skittering over my face as I slept. The crawling creatures I'd been so drawn to as a child were no longer simply colorful, moving things to be prodded and played with, but instead were weighted down by my new knowledge and associations, becoming disgusting, even dangerous, pests.

Now that these learned responses have been woven indelibly into my concept of insects, I know I will no longer be able to exist fully and joyfully in the moment when the cicadas emerge, as I did when I was a child. Even as I remember the feelings of awe and elation that accompanied the first emergence, I can't think of their reemergence now without a slight shudder of dread accompanying the excitement. I think of their protruding eyes and trembling wings and find them repulsive. I worry about them dropping onto me from the trees. I am horrified at the thought of crunching through piles of shells on the sidewalk. All my experiences from the age of four to twenty-one have intervened and shaped my perceptions. I have hardly been aware of the change, but my own seemingly instinctive reaction to the thought of the cicadas' return shows me that my ideas about what can be moving or beautiful have been limited over time. I worry that I've become one of the people with their faces tucked down, constantly taking cover inside and unable to fully appreciate the uniqueness of the experience.

Like Wordsworth, I know that this new perspective is inescapable—I can't undo the effects the last seventeen years have had on my reactions—but since mine is not pleasant or itself constructive, as his was, I cannot simply be content with it displacing my old vision. I need to find some kind of unity between the two. I believe that the experience might even be enriched and deepened by the repellence I can't seem to escape. That repellence does not have to be an obstacle—it can also be a gateway to a new kind of vision. Wordsworth's landscape above Tintern Abbey is presented as a beautiful scene from which, with his new perspective and maturity, he can remain distinct, viewing the rolling waters, lofty cliffs, and pastoral farms from a distance. It is a landscape that passively allows itself to be interpreted by the poet. My cicadas, however, will be a form of nature far different from this peaceful, quiet scene. The cicadas are not an unchanging, waiting landscape that I could have returned to at any time of my choosing, but rather an active, living phenomenon—I do not control when I return to them, but rather must go to them when they return. They are not something I will be able to distance myself from, either. Instead, they will intrude themselves into every aspect of my surroundings, settling into the crevices of tree branches, perching on the tires of my car, crashing into my own body in their clumsy flight. While the mature Wordsworth cannot fully immerse himself in his landscape, I will be forcibly immersed in the cicadas. I will inevitably have a strong reaction to their presence—it is what that reaction will be that I hope to shape.

In many ways, the cicadas embody what Aldous Huxley criticizes Wordsworth for failing to recognize in nature in his essay "Wordsworth in the Tropics." Huxley contrasts Wordsworth's Lake District with the jungle, where, rather than welcoming the

traveler, the nature of these places inspires in a human intruder "the uneasy feeling that he is an alien in the midst of an innumerable throng of hostile beings." I believe the nature I will encounter in the cicadas will have more in common with Huxley's tropics than Wordsworth's English woods, both in its literal form of millions of crawling insects and in the feelings it inspires. I am also seeking a significantly different reaction to the event than Wordsworth's comfortable insights, which Huxley criticizes as attempts to find a human-like soul in nature in order to make it more familiar and hospitable, creating a "metaphysical shelter in the midst of the jungle of immediately apprehended reality." Although he does not dismiss Wordsworth's belief in an underlying unity in nature as worthless or misguided, he does argue that to subordinate natural reactions completely in favor of a more intellectual relationship with the world stunts experience, writing that "[i]f one would live well, one must live completely, with the whole being—with the body and the instincts, as well as with the conscious mind." The conflict between these two aspects of existence comes up frequently in Romanticism, from the fading of Wordsworth's "passion" and its replacement by "elevated thoughts" to Keats's desire for "a life of sensation rather than of thoughts." While the two poets seem to definitively choose between them, I, like Huxley, hope to be able to experience both. I don't believe that the more complex thoughts that come with time must necessarily dampen the powerful sensations of childhood. Huxley compares the philosophies Wordsworth and others embrace to a "well-lit, commodious house," and, like the houses everyone around me retreated to during the first emergence, they can eliminate many of the potential nuances and depths of experience nature offers by shutting out its unpleasant or unwelcome aspects.

I hope to resist these kinds of shelters. I am not looking for a vision of the unity of life that Wordsworth describes in "Tintern Abbey" or that Coleridge expresses when he blesses the humble, creaking rook in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison." I don't want to see the cicadas as a means by which to glimpse a universal principle that transcends their unpleasant surface appearance. Those repellent qualities are not something to be retreated from or looked beyond, but instead form an integral part of what I believe will make the second cicada emergence a powerful, moving event for me now that I can no longer see them in the same light I did seventeen years ago. I will not find that easy joy of the past again, but I also will not be compartmentalizing my fear as I once did, attaching all my feelings of fear and uneasiness to the nymphs while the adult cicadas remained beautiful and unburdened. My new reactions and understanding of their transformation have allowed the two to bleed into each other, neither the adult and nymph forms nor the feelings the two inspire remaining fully distinct from one another any longer. In *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke writes that, "[t]he passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror." Accordingly, it is the uneasiness I feel about the cicadas that, I believe, will ultimately make the experience more fully sublime than it was seventeen years ago, when those misgivings about the cicadas were not mingled with my sense of their beauty. Rather than seeking to perfectly replicate my childhood vision or to draw a system out of the change between my initial and new experience, I want to do something that is both more basic

and more difficult: simply see the cicadas themselves fully, in all their contraries—as both nymph and adult, as both beautiful and horrifying, as one creature.

I intend to see the actual emergence of the cicadas this year. I want to watch them creep up out of the earth when the temperature tells them it is time to leave the roots they have been nestled among for the past seventeen years and follow their struggling journey up the tree trunks that evening in the dim, trembling halo of my flashlight. If I can, I'll watch the shells shudder and split in the dark, and the white, tender forms slowly rear back and painstakingly pull themselves leg by leg out of their old husks. They will be at their most vulnerable then, soft and helpless against any keen-eyed birds while they wait for their own wings, little more than shriveled nubs at this point, to stretch and stiffen. Over the course of the night their delicate skins will blacken and harden, the cool night air a forge after years of protection in shells and soil, until finally the sun will rise on shining, winged adults still clinging to their own hollow ghosts. It probably won't be a pleasant process to watch. If anything, it will be slightly disgusting. But even as it is disturbing, it will also be fascinating and unsettlingly beautiful. In finally seeing the entire process of the cicadas' lives, from the always ugly nymphs to the once beautiful cicadas themselves, I hope not merely to remember but actually to see more fully that hint of the sublime I first glimpsed, but could not fully comprehend, seventeen years ago.

* * *

June 2, 2007

The first cicadas had appeared that morning, visible in green silhouette through the sunlit leaves overhead and squatting matter-of-factly on every branch. The ease with which they slipped into the landscape made it seem that our yard had been bare these

seventeen years without my realizing it, the stems and grass merely a background waiting to be filled in by the insects upon their return. Although not yet as numerous as I remembered, they still weighed down everything they clung to, making the twigs of the bushes along the edges of our yard sag and sway heavily in the weak breeze, their ends a mesh of leaves and shining wings.

By midday these early risers were creating a low murmur more felt than heard, a sound that might have been taken for the hum just audible beneath a power-line had it not been spread through the whole of the air. Their song was made subdued by an increasingly overcast sky, the grating, electrical noise seemingly giving voice to the damp pressure that hinted at a coming downpour, a storm that never fully materialized. Instead, the clouds bled away their energy over the course of the afternoon in patchy showers that left the yard gray and blurred, even the bold reds, oranges, and blacks of the cicadas appearing drab in the watery light, their bodies turned to sodden lumps that clung morosely to the bushes. I'd remembered the cicadas as responsive, each one an individual with particular characteristics invisible to everyone except me. But these insects seemed hardly aware of my presence, and my tentative touch on their cold backs drew no response beyond a half-hearted flick of their damp wings as their red eyes continued to stare straight ahead, unmoved.

I spent the day inside, telling myself that this sprinkling of insects was not the full emergence and that more had to be coming that night, but I was beginning to question whether my memories were accurate or my expectations realistic. The emergence seventeen years ago had come unbidden and unexpected. I had not sought the cicadas out—they had literally risen out of the ground all around me, and each new detail

revealed by the event's unfolding had glowed with a faint aura of magic, its causes and purposes mysterious. This time I'd spent weeks researching the cicadas and their habits, filling in the gaps in my memories with photographs and sound clips, shoring up the hazy scenes with a fuller understanding of the processes I had been oblivious to as a four year old. I'd unearthed every detail on them I could, even reading recipes posted online for everything from cicada tacos to cicada rhubarb pie, things I had no intention of trying. In the days leading up to the emergence, I'd collected jars to watch them in and had traveled over a hundred miles in order to be at home for their arrival, all in an effort to recapture and expand the feelings that had come so easily years ago. But now I worried that the opposite might be happening. Inevitably, my anticipation had raised my expectations for this emergence and possibly exaggerated my memories of the first. I'd already seen the process once and had now read about it and studied the biological mechanisms behind each step. My own efforts had made the things I'd once been amazed by mundane and predictable, and I did not feel the astonishment Burke regards as necessary for experiencing the sublime as I looked at the cicadas now. My preparations had only pushed the things I'd hoped the emergence would inspire further away, any sense of sublimity fading before my understanding. Without the intermingled awe to contrast to and compete with the repellence, the emotion remained mere disgust, uninteresting and static.

The scenes from the first emergence were growing smoky and translucent as they were eclipsed by the far duller but more immediate sights of the day, slipping away like a half-remembered dream dispersed by the hard edges of reality upon waking. My memories of the emotions that had accompanied those images were disintegrating as

well, the sensations becoming unreal as I sought to reconstruct them. When I tried to recall the details and feelings that had formed the basis for my memories, I found the vibrant, charismatic cicadas I'd once played with largely replaced by the damp, blank-eyed creatures outside. Still, if I could not find something beautiful or even impressive in the adult cicadas, I was certain that the transformations I hoped to see that evening, though they would be a very different experience, would still produce as powerful a response in me as other aspects of the emergence had when I was a child. I understood the process but had not yet witnessed it, and I hoped that the novelty would be enough to reawaken that fascination.

Dusk came early to the drizzling day, seemingly drawn on by my own eagerness for night. I was outside hourly, flashlight in hand as I examined the tree-trunks and grass without knowing what exactly would signal the arrival above ground of more cicadas. When they finally did appear around ten o'clock it was sudden: the trees that had been bare an hour before were abruptly covered with shining brown shells of nymphs that seemed to be bumpy extensions of the bark, the only sign that they were alive their slow but steady flow upwards into the spreading branches, as though they were carried along by some invisible, viscous fluid that dribbled skyward over every available surface.

The weak, yellow circle cast by my flashlight only illuminated tiny snapshots of the yard, creating a collage-like impression of the scene: a few nymphs hanging by their claws from the thorny branches of the bushes, the nubs of wings already visible beneath the varnish-like coating of skin on the ones trundling over the sidewalk, the tips of the grass shivering with the motion of hundreds of nymphs as they writhed in and out of sight, hauling themselves over sticks or creeping below the leaves of dandelions as they

made their way across the ground. I was constantly flicking my light up and down, torn between wanting to watch the massive migration occurring on every vertical object around me and the need to keep an eye on the stragglers dragging themselves heavily across the sidewalk, obliviously wandering within range of my shoes. I pivoted slowly in place, and every area my light revealed seemed unsteady, each surface broken by their forms and rippling with their movement.

Even though I could only piece together the whole from the fragments my flashlight provided, the sheer massiveness of it was itself astonishing. It seemed impossible that the ground could have contained so many creatures just below the surface these past years without some outward sign, some shifting of the soil, some trembling in the leaves of the trees whose roots they attached to. I consciously tried to hold onto those feelings as I moved among the trees and followed the journey of the nymphs with my light, watching hundreds of them struggle for a foothold at the base of each tree with their grasping claws and clamber awkwardly up the bark. Many of them fell back into the dirt with an audible plop a moment later, forming a steady rain all around me. I tried to focus on the uniqueness and rarity of this experience, but still I found myself shuddering between a genuine awe and an inescapable disgust, flinching every time I felt something give beneath my foot and trying not to think about the possibility of one of them falling on me. I could only just bring myself to run a fingertip over their cool, ridged backs, and I immediately snatched my hand back at the blind groping of a clawed foot or the shuddering of a shell beneath my touch. The horror of the nymphs I remembered feeling as a child was bubbling to life, flowing just underneath the surface of my fascination, ready to break through at any moment. The two did not quite mingle, but rather uneasily

coexisted, slithering past and around one another within me as they highlighted each other while remaining distinct.

I balanced precariously on the edge between them, teetering from one to the other, until I noticed the sound of the nymphs making their way up the bark only a few feet from my face, a barely audible scratching. The sight of the nymphs themselves had been new only in the numbers in which they appeared, but this noise was something I had no memory of. I lowered the flashlight, letting the light pool onto my shoes and simply listened. It was hard to identify at first, a natural sound that made me think of the burbling of a creek or the rustling of leaves, but also a mechanical one, like innumerable keyboards tapping in the distance or countless ticking watches—the sound of hundreds of thousands of clawed feet scrabbling over a dozen different surfaces all around me. I heard dry, fingernail-like scratching over the bark in front of me, a softer rustling through the grass and soil at my feet, the clicking and scraping of sharp claws clambering over the shells of other nymphs, and, most terrible of all, a faint scrabbling in the branches just over my head, the leaves rustling independently of the rhythm of the wind. The more closely I listened, the deeper and more pervasive the sound became, extending beyond this tree and my yard to the whole block, the entire neighborhood, as they filled in every patch of silence with their organic static. The noise surrounded me, the darkness hiding its source and blending each click and scratch together so that they formed a shell of sound around me, leaving me to imagine the multitude of dull-eyed creatures that produced it as they moved with a mechanical, monotonous determination. I was immersed again, but not in the way I'd expected or sought. The old horror took over and I

fled, stepping recklessly as I only half-heartedly checked the ground with my light before placing my feet, eager to shut out that noise with walls and doors.

It was well after midnight before I was willing to venture out again, the oppressive presence of the nymphs pushed back by a few hours of light and quiet. I couldn't help feeling that I'd failed somehow in my earlier reactions, that I'd allowed myself to be too distracted by the fear I felt to see the sublimity that I was certain was there. Despite my reluctance, I felt obligated to try again, still holding onto my hope that the experience of seeing the cicadas emerging from their shells would inspire the feelings I sought.

When I stepped outside, it was into a completely different scene than the one I'd left. It was cooler and darker, the sound of the nymphs' climbing greatly reduced now that many of them had settled into place to begin undergoing their change. The massive transformation was just beginning, and before I even swung my flashlight up to examine the trees I could already see in the darkness the pale silhouettes of molting cicadas against the blackness of bark and foliage. Only days before I'd run across the term "cicada bloom" as an alternative name for an emergence, and it suddenly seemed the most appropriate term possible for what I was seeing. They reared back from the trees and rose out of tufts of grass as though they were exotic mushrooms appearing after the day's rain, seemingly pushing their way straight out of bark and earth. They dangled like clusters of fruit from the branches above, extensions of the plants to which they clung. I'd learned they were called tenerals during this dangerous, liminal time in which they began their transformation from the pale, shrimp-like things that had pulled free of the protective shells into the darker, winged adults, and it sounded to me like the name of a

rare, tropical flower that could only be cultivated in a hothouse. Yet here they were, sprouting in my Midwestern front yard in the thousands. For the first time since I'd seen the nymphs flowing up the trees, I unhesitatingly considered myself privileged to be witnessing this phenomenon.

It had rained again during the time I was inside, and everything was covered with a light mist that glittered in the light as I moved, sparkling on the cicadas and plants alike. Droplets edged the leaves and traced out the contours of the spider webs strung between them. They created small sparks at the tip of every blade of grass and clung to the end of each dangling cicada, trembling in the light every time the cicadas shifted or flicked their forming wings. The whole yard shivered with pinpricks of light that twinkled and sparkled unexpectedly so that nothing seemed steady or solid, transforming the cicadas from insects into tiny stars that were beautiful without question or qualification. The effect faded when I brought the light closer to a few freshly emerged individuals, but as they were more fully illuminated I found that they were translucent, their bodies diffusing the light throughout themselves as though they were made of wax. They seemed to be lit from within, glowing like yellow candles against the green-black of the leaves they clung to, and their wings arched back from their bodies in various stages of development, unfurling as though pulled taut by a slow-motion wind.

The process of the transformation itself was unsettling to watch—the split opening down the back of the old skin like a wound that exposed the pale flesh beneath, the soft tearing sound as the cicada inside pushed itself up and through the shell, its body alternately visibly straining and resting as it seemingly gave birth to itself, the moment at which the cicada and the old skin became two distinct creatures. Each new cicada

continued to tremble and pulsate as it stepped lightly back and forth on the empty shell, testing out its new legs, but still seemingly reluctant to leave behind the body it had spent nearly two decades in. It was a primal, slightly grisly process, but there was an elegance to the precision with which it was executed, and the tenerals themselves were beautiful in the fragility of their bodies and the delicacy of their transparent, petal-soft wings. For the half hour or so before they fully hardened and began to darken, they seemed to consist of flesh nearly the same color and texture as my own that had been molded into insect form, something that made them both more sympathetic and yet also more alien than they were in any other stage of their lifecycle. The sound of the remaining nymphs continuing to make their trek up the trees and bushes was still audible, but at that moment I did not notice it. Again, the horror and repellence were still there, but this time they were muffled, no longer competing with but rather a dark background for the glittering beauty I saw in the cicadas. It wasn't quite the union of emotions I'd sought, but I decided that this balance was close enough.

I was startled abruptly from my contemplation by the surprisingly close sound of heavy, stumbling footsteps coming up the sidewalk. The man's shape was a dim, undefined silhouette except for the glowing orange end of a cigarette bobbing wildly from one side of the sidewalk to the other with his unsteady motion, a completely unexpected figure at this hour in my suburban neighborhood. He paused at the end of the driveway and turned to look at me, his features impossible to see, but the hovering ember still swaying slightly as he rocked in place, its acrid scent reaching out to snake around me and sting my nose. I kept the flashlight down so that it cast an elongated pool of light in the few paces between us, realizing that, if I had to get back inside, going straight to

the door would mean blindly crossing the entire yard, stepping through all those soft, delicate forms that clung to the tips of the grass and all the hard, shelled nymphs that still moved just below. I imagined that they would be cold and slightly damp on the tops of my sandaled feet, and didn't want to imagine what stepping on so many of them would feel like. And yet I braced myself to do so, surprisingly calm at the prospect. As disturbing as the cicadas sometimes were, I knew they were harmless and that stepping on them would only be disgusting, not dangerous. I was aware again of the sound of their climbing, the clicks and scratches filling the dark stretch between the beam of my flashlight and the light of the porch, but now that darkness was comparatively inviting as I prepared to step into it.

All this crossed my mind within an instant, more felt than consciously thought, but a moment later the man had turned away and staggered on. When he reached the end of the block and disappeared into the deeper darkness beneath the trees across the street, I turned off the flashlight, its trembling beam and my own dazzled vision making me feel vulnerable now. The brief rush of adrenalin had left me more alert to the whole of my surroundings even as the sudden darkness left me utterly blind for a few seconds, wiping away all my thoughts and attempts at analysis for the first time since the cicadas' return. The scent of cigarette smoke still hung in the air, but it was quickly being dispersed by the cool night breeze, along with the vestiges of my fear. The sound of climbing nymphs mingled with the wind and the rustling leaves, and I heard the soft clicks and murmurs of the adult cicadas still disturbed by the passage of my light a few minutes before. Each sound remained distinct this time rather than forming a disorienting haze of noise, and mingled with the insect sounds I heard the steady dripping of water droplets from the

leaves above onto the concrete at my feet. The scent of wet earth lay thickly in the air, and beneath that the just discernable, sour scent of abandoned shells and dead cicadas that had for some reason failed to fully transform already breaking down in the dampness and returning to the soil they'd crawled out of mere hours before. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, the emerging cicadas grew more distinct, the blurred, light masses resolving into individual forms, pale and blue-gray now without the yellowish cast of the flashlight. I was fully aware that they covered every tree, bush, and lawn around me, but I no longer had to push that knowledge to the back of my mind in order to subdue a sense of horror. I no longer felt any need to seek shelter from them inside but rather wished that I could spend the rest of the night out here, watching wave after wave of them emerge, alternately lightening and darkening the things to which they clung. They were still alien and intimidating in their numbers, but that strangeness was no longer threatening in the face of the actual fear of a moment before.

I'd hoped from the beginning that my uneasiness would be a path rather than an obstacle to seeing their sublimity, but all my efforts to make it so had been fruitless. Without realizing it, I had been approaching the experience with expectations of the feelings it would inspire already in place, attempting to follow the emotional map I'd created rather than exploring my own reactions. I'd been more like Wordsworth than I'd thought, substituting thoughts for feeling as I'd attempted to draw predetermined reactions from myself. Although I had not intended to find a system in my changing reactions, I had just as surely looked for something beyond the cicadas themselves, despite my intentions. I had wanted a strong, positive response to them, and so I had pushed myself to find unity between my contradictory emotions. I'd expected to find that

unity in a reaction fitting Burke's concept of the sublime and had tried to force my reactions into this pattern, which seemed the only way to reconcile the two, but naturally had failed to do so. It was exactly the thing Aldous Huxley had criticized in "Wordsworth in the Tropics," though I had not realized it initially. In my eagerness to glimpse the sublime and find some way to continue to be moved in the face of new fear and new knowledge, I had tried to bring about sensations through calculation. Now the unification had finally occurred in a moment when it was completely unexpected and unsought, after I'd given up on achieving the vision of the sublime I'd wanted. I realized that I had seen glimpses of this union earlier that night when I'd been moved by the strange beauty of the damp shells of the cicadas and their wings shining in the light, but it had taken an unexpected intrusion to jar me out of the path I'd fixed on, to brush away the overlying film of thought and simply allow my reactions to unfurl without hindrance or force from my conscious mind, to let myself look fully at what I'd already begun to see.

It took another unexpected encounter to bring me to this understanding of why the same scene was so altered after I'd been startled by the unexpected appearance of the man when I seemed to have found no deeper insights than I'd had minutes before. When I began reading and researching after the event in an effort to place my experience neatly in the context of Romanticism, I set out at one point looking for Huxley's essay, "Wordsworth in the Tropics." On my first trip to the library, however, I checked out the wrong book by accident, a different collection of Huxley's writings that happened to contain a poem I hadn't heard of—"Cicadas." In the poem, as Huxley wanders during the night "[t]hrough [his] own spirit's dark discouragement, / deprived of inward as of outward sight," he goes among trees filled with singing cicadas and listens to the

"insensate zest" of their sound. They sing, he writes, because "life commands, and Life! Is all their cry," and he concludes that they are "[i]n madness more than [he] in reason wise." Their sound and continuous affirmation of their own existence reawakens his desire to live by silencing his torturous thoughts and reawakening feeling, so that Huxley ultimately praises the "Divine Unreason" he sees in the cicadas. The surprising coincidence of encountering this poem prompted me to continually revisit it as I tried to understand my experience, and it ultimately contributed to my realization that it was the momentary silencing of my thoughts and heightening of my senses brought on by something completely unlooked for and startling that was the key to the change I'd felt after the intruding man had left. I couldn't plan to be astonished or moved—such maneuverings had to be stilled before what I'd sought with my plans and research could actually occur. Similarly, it took an unplanned stumbling into a text I hadn't sought to push me out of the lines of thought I'd set up for myself to follow, allowing me to grasp what the experience had actually been rather than what I'd intended it to be.

All this analysis only came later, however. At the moment, I simply allowed myself to exist, no longer thinking or truly fearing, but simply absorbing every sight, sound, and scent without dampening them through my struggles with what they meant for my goals, allowing each of my senses to draw in every detail the world offered. Had someone offered me one of those cicada tacos during those minutes, I might have taken it. Inevitably, this sense began to fade as my mind started working once again, but it was no less powerful for its transitory nature. Although I was not sure whether my ultimate vision would fit Burke's definition of the sublime, I no longer felt any inclination to attempt to force it to do so. It was enough to find that the awe and the disgust, the

fascination and the recoiling were woven together, forming a single strand of experience from which the emotions and the images, though still self-contained, could no longer be drawn apart or disentangled from one another, binding together the nymphs, the tenerals, and the adults, the dark outlines of the branches and leaves, and the glittering dew that clung to us all.

!

In a battered library book with peeling call number and creased spine, she reads: "At 5 to 6 weeks the baby's arm will be as long as the exclamation point at the end of this sentence!"

I was born with a blue birthmark—like a dot of ink on my shoulder-blade, my mother tells me. She'd tried to wash it off with a fingertip of saliva, thinking one of the nurses had pressed the nib of a pen into my newborn skin, but it was embedded in my flesh and not to be wiped away.

Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light.

Over the years it blurred and faded with my growing, the period spreading into the suggestion of a thumb-print sized bruise.

She is unmarried, and, thinking of her family's reaction, sees only one option. An appointment is made.

Blue was always my favorite color. It is the rarest hue in flowers, one that is usually stained by a blush of purple or that clings uncertainly to petals only a few shades away from white. For medieval artists, the crushed lapis lazuli needed to create the egg-tempera pigment made blue more expensive even than the gold leaf with which they embellished their works. It is a color the water envies enough to steal from the sky in a rippling, shadowed imitation.

We live with our eyes turned inward, interacting not with the world but the reflection it casts on the surface of our minds, a reflection seemingly warped and distorted by the brain's rippled, pitted surface. Some images shrink to nothingness, lost in a darkened fold, others stretch and blur over their convex, arching canvas, expanding beyond all natural proportion.

... whatever heterogeneous elements life may have accumulated from without will not permit the grandeur of human unity greatly to be violated...

It is the color of the heavens and, as such, is often associated with divinity and purity in art—the blue skin of Hindu deities like Vishnu, the robe of the Virgin Mary.

According to some interpretations of Catholic doctrine, interpretations which the family church holds to, she is told an out-of-wedlock child cannot be baptized to the Catholic Church, and the congregation shrinks by one.

The color also signifies sadness and depression—the blues, Picasso's "Blue Period." And yet these give birth to blues music and *The Old Guitarist*.

The first painting I learned the name of was Picasso's *The Old Guitarist*. It was presented to me in third grade as a watery shadow superimposed by the overhead projector on the cracked, cream-colored bricks of the art room wall. A cold image of jutting, exposed joints and ragged clothing that could not keep out the azure cold that crept into the guitarist's skin.

The suggestion of a bruise.

Our art teacher told us the painting was not entirely what it seemed, however. It was invisible on the faded projection in the imperfect dark of the classroom, but she assured us that close inspection of the original revealed the outlines of a young woman behind the melancholy old man, a figure abandoned and painted over.

A not uncommon feature in paintings. Pigments fade with time, revealing lines and images the artist never intended to show. A foot or hand is framed with echoes of itself so that the figure seems to have been caught in mid-motion, hesitating uncertainly. All the possibilities considered and discarded by the artist's shifting mind rise to the surface,

showing the initial, tentative explorations of the still fluid space before the forms were firmly planted, each alternative now made as solid as the final figure.

The shadow of her lips touches his upturned ear. She is still a presence in the painting, a nearly invisible, whispering muse.

My mother reads: "At 5 to 6 weeks the baby's arm will be as long as the exclamation point at the end of this sentence!" The appointment is cancelled three hours before she is due at the clinic.

An exclamation point. A punctuation mark that takes up only a sliver of space on the page and uses no more than a drop of ink seems a fragile pivot-point for a life.

A miniscule blue dot, as though a drop of ink had been caught under my skin.

Clinical depression runs through my family like a dark, inky stain in our genetic cloth, bleeding from one thread to another. In some places it becomes lighter, more diffuse, while in others a fresh infusion of color is brought in and the stains cross, deepening.

A genetic bruise.

Low levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin are associated with numerous mental disorders—depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, some anxiety disorders—as well as the feeling of self-transcendence and the perception of a unifying force beyond the tangible world associated with spiritual experiences.

A single doubt, a minor failure, bleeds like a dab of watercolor on a dampened page, heedlessly running over the carefully laid plans, blurring the images, turning the colors muddy.

Meaning spills from one object to another, their distinctions revealed as illusions.

A fading of borders.

Exclamation points look to me like the power switch of an old computer printed with 1 and 0, on and off—the kind not simply pressed but flipped up and down, able to tilt either way.

It is a color strained for in nature, rarely fully achieved. The Russian Blue cat and blue roan horses are merely gray, and a truly blue rose is impossible to produce without dye or genetic engineering. Most natural forms called blue merely aspire to the hue, always falling short.

An entire existence hinged on a casual sentence, a punctuation mark, a last minute change of mind.

He was most content as a silent observer—at the prospect of speaking in public his eyes became downcast, his hands took on the concentrated stillness that conceals trembling. But every month my grandfather volunteered to read in his church, closeting himself away in his study with a tape recorder, endlessly playing his own words back to himself as he rehearsed.

A life resting in the choice of a moment.

A decision continuously made anew, for decades.

Before each holiday meal I sat with my suddenly awkward hands pinned beneath my legs and my head bowed, eyes tracing the patterns woven into the table-cloth as everyone around me murmured in tandem prayers to which I never knew the words.

I've been asked if I feel I've been excluded. I reply I prefer to think of it as a narrow escape.

A color pinned in the sky, just out of reach.

With time I've learned the words. Still, I've never said them. Even when known, they did not come naturally to me.

The cathedral was undeniably beautiful. I admired its vast, hushed spaces, its forests of columns that rose straight up with a focused accuracy no trees could have replicated. I loved the intricate patterns at their crowns that flared like breaking waves over the arched ceiling. And yet, when the girl next to me closed her eyes and raised her hands, asking—rhetorically, I hoped—how anyone could stand in a place like this and not believe in God, I could not quite grasp what she meant. The building's beauty left me awed and light, but it was ultimately the beauty of a gorgeous shell found on the beach, containing empty air that, when held close to my senses, reflected back to me only the sound of my own heartbeat.

I once carefully listened to the space inside every shell that lined the windowsill of my aunt's seaside-themed bathroom, but none of the roarings I heard ever sounded to me like the ocean.

Emotions move liquidly beneath the surface of things without regard for the separations of objects and people, coloring events far from their source so that external reality seems only a skin stretched over the more basic currents and pulses that drive it.

Although I always loved art, I never enjoyed painting, confining myself instead to pens and pencils. I disliked the loss of control that came with the more liquid mediums, the colors overlapping and smearing my carefully defined edges.

A pinprick that became a bruise.

The old guitarist still playing on despite the creeping cold, listening to murmurs from just beneath the surface of the visible world.

...a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns

A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Prayers to which I never knew the words.

To every Form of being is assigned
An active Principle:--howe'er removed
From sense and observation, it subsists
In all things, in all natures; in the stars
Of azure heaven, the unenduring clouds,
In flower and tree, in every pebbly stone

Words borrowed, but never truly owned.

Only in the forms most distant from humans—birds, insects, fish, a few flowers—does the color seem to come with mindless ease.

he sensed no other world than what he saw,
he caught no glimpse of some celestial river.

Creatures that are the objects of meditation, but have little capacity for self-consideration themselves.

The color makes treasures of the most incongruous, humble of items for the satin bowerbird of Australia. In order to attract mates, the males build complex nests intricately decorated with anything blue they can find, from flower petals and egg shells to bottle caps and dropped pens. What quirk of evolution made something so difficult for a bird in the wild bush to obtain the key to all their courtship rituals, and thus their very survival as a species? Before casual human litter made their artwork easier, the only common things in the bowerbirds' world that could be a true, brilliant blue probably were their own eyes—startling jewels ranging from indigo to violet laid into their relatively dull-colored feathers. It is as though they are drawn to echoes of their own gazes, constantly seeking externally something carried within their own bodies.

An expression of affirmation, of enthusiasm, of emotion—a punctuation mark strewn liberally through our early writing and then consistently pared down with the onset of maturity.

I imagine that, when a satin bowerbird looks at the world, every suggestion of blue in its field of vision blazes with a light only it can perceive, drawing the animal irresistibly to even broken and discarded objects, its collection governed by rules incomprehensible to nearly every other creature. I've sometimes wondered what stops them from trying to collect bits of sky to hang on the twigs of their nests, but, for a satin bowerbird, a flake of sky would be no more or less valuable or beautiful than the milk caps and bits of string it already hordes. In the bowerbird's eyes, they would be the same thing.

the dusk over Louveciennes was not a heaven
of Tiepolo cherubs; every stroke he made

absorbed her absence; with calm, even
paint he built its blue. This was the way he prayed.

I learned of the birthmark when I was sixteen, its existence revealed by a casual comment by my mother on this minor curiosity. I went to the mirror and stared in amazement at the

tiny, faded patch of blue on my back, too faint to notice had I not been looking for it. Marveled that it should have lain under my skin all my life without my knowing it, hidden until I looked at the proper angle.

Depression and transcendence, rooted in the same color, the same chemical, each, perhaps, a promise of the other—a shadow and a light.

A color spiritual and primal, encompassing both with an effortless tranquility.

I take walks in the evening to see the forms of trees and buildings emphasized by the setting sun. Despite the fading intensity of the light, its angle makes the shadows deepen and the illuminated sides of objects flare as the blue sky ignites to a brilliant red and gold, highlighting each irregularity of rippled bark or peeling paint, emphasizing their shapes. Surrounded by their own shadows, things seem to take up the space they occupy with more solidity and confidence at sunset than at any other time, reminding me of their reality, restoring stable distance and depth to the world. I look beyond them to the flame-colored sky, until, when I finally look away, blue shadows dance in my vision, bruising everything I look at.

A curl of cool color contained at the heart of an otherwise gold and orange flame—the core of its heat.

After a careless fall or stumble, once the first shock of pain and tears had faded, I would watch the resulting bruise blossom underneath my skin, subsiding after the initial flare of purple and red to a pale green or blue in a few days. The colors made the skin look cold and dead, and yet heat rolled palpably off them, tangible even to a hand held a few finger-widths away from the flesh, warmer and seemingly more alive than the skin around them. They sensed the echoing warmth of my hand while the rest of my skin remained unmoved by the near touch.

Not a single feeling ingrained in me, but a capacity for feeling. A vast, empty space in the mind that echoes back what it is given.

Collecting in my mind ideas and images as the satin bowerbird arranges its blue trinkets around its nest, their connections resting in my own thoughts and gaze.

Never freezing, but continuing on with a guitar, a tape recorder, a paint brush. A life resting on the choice of every moment.

This was the way he prayed.

A way of seeing coded in the coiled threads running through each cell, led to by the worn roads of well-traveled paths of thought. Being subject to a loss of all sense of balance and perspective for no perceivable cause, but also the ability to find a kind of salvation in a sunset, in something as common as the color blue.

At five to six weeks, I could have curled comfortably around an exclamation point. I was conceived five to six weeks earlier, but my life began in that later moment, with a choice. I marvel at the very fact of my existence every time I run across one in print.

My most intricate, soaring thoughts and feelings are prompted not by philosophies or learned beliefs but by a faded projection of a painting, the dusting of color on a flower petal, a tiny punctuation mark. They are hazy with halos of possible meanings that shift in and out of focus until one is, for a moment, settled on. A question continuously asked anew, and each time a different answer uncovered beneath the old.

Living always poised on the edge of a choice.

An ambiguous, beautiful color.

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Notes

Notes are keyed by page number

Rills: A Map of a Misreading

1 "[r]eason is… to the substance": Shelley, Percy B. "A Defence of Poetry." *Major British Poets of the Romantic Period*. Ed. William Heath. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973. p. 975.

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2 "incense-bearing tree[s]": Coleridge, Samuel T. "Kubla Khan." *Major British Poets of the Romantic Period*. Ed. William Heath. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973. pp. 474-475. l. 9.

2 "caverns measureless to man": Ibid., l. 4.

2 "lifeless ocean": Ibid., l. 28.

2 "dome in air": Ibid., l. 46.

2 "sunless sea": Ibid., l. 5.

2 "caves of ice": Ibid., l. 36.

2 "And here… sinuous rills": Ibid., l. 8.

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5 "deep and genuine sadness": Ibid., l. 492.

5 "dejection": Ibid., l. 491.

5 "usurpation": Ibid., l. 533.

5 "awful promise": Ibid., l. 534.

6 "Imagination! lifting… unfathered vapour": Ibid., ll. 525-527.

6 "invisible world… greatness make[s] abode": Ibid., l. 536.

6 "blessed in… perfection and reward": Ibid., ll. 545-546.

6 "'I recognize thy glory'": Ibid., l. 532.

6-7 "their own… reward": Ibid., l. 546.

7 "build that dome in air": Coleridge, Samuel T. "Kubla Khan." *Major British Poets of the Romantic Period*. Ed. William Heath. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973. pp. 474-475. pp. 621-623. l. 46.

7 "incense-bearing tree[s]": Ibid., l. 9.

7 "sunny spots of greenery": Ibid., l. 11.

7 "[a]ll high poetry... oaks potentially": Shelley, Percy B. "A Defence of Poetry." *Major British Poets of the Romantic Period.* Ed. William Heath. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973. p. 985.

7 "pleasure-dome": Coleridge, Samuel T. "Kubla Khan." *Major British Poets of the Romantic Period.* Ed. William Heath. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973. pp. 474-475. pp. 621-623. l. 2.

7 "dome in air": Ibid., l. 46.

Reunion

16 "passion": Wordsworth, William. "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey." *Major British Poets of the Romantic Period.* Ed. William Heath. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973. pp. 202-204. l. 80.
16 "a feeling and… from the eye": Ibid., ll. 83-86.
16 "like a roe… o'er the mountains": Ibid., ll. 69-70.
16 "somewhat of a sad perplexity": Ibid., l. 63.
16 "[t]hat time is past… all its dizzy raptures": Ibid., ll. 86-88.
16 "elevated thoughts": Ibid., l. 98.
16 "something far more deeply interfused": Ibid., l. 99.
16-17 "a motion… all things": Ibid., ll. 102-105.
17 "far deeper zeal… holier love": Ibid., ll. 158-159.
17 "wild ecstasies": Ibid., l. 142.
17 "matured… a sober pleasure": Ibid., ll. 142-143.
12 "[a]bundant recompense": Ibid., l. 91.
20 "the uneasy… of hostile beings": Huxley, Aldous. "Wordsworth in the Tropics." *Collected Essays.* New York: Harper & Row, 1959. p. 2.
20 "metaphysical shelter… apprehended reality": Ibid., p. 5.
20 "[i]f one would… the conscious mind": Ibid., p. 7.
20 "passion": Wordsworth, William. "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey." *Major British Poets of the Romantic Period.* Ed. William Heath. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973. pp. 202-204. l. 80.
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21 "[t]he passion caused… some degree of horror": Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.* Ed. J. T. Boulton. Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1968. p. 57.
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34 "life commands… all their cry": Ibid., l. 20.
34 "[i]n madness more… reason wise": Ibid., l. 32.
34 "Divine Unreason": Ibid., l. 54.

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41 "he sensed no… celestial river": Walcott, Derek. *Tiepolo's Hound*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. p. 86.

42 "the dusk over… the way he prayed": Ibid., p. 86.

44 "This was the way he prayed": Ibid., p. 86.